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STATE FOR INL: AIMEE MARTIN, AND FOR WHA/CEN, DS/IP/WHA,
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TAGS: KCRM KJUS PGOV SNAR ASEC HO

SUBJECT: ANOTHER JOINT POLICE-MILITARY OPERATION IN
HONDURAS IN EFFORT TO HALT VIOLENT CRIME

Classified By: Ambassador Charles Ford, reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Police and military authorities were summoned to a late meeting at Casa Presidencial by President Manuel Zelaya on March 4 to discuss measures to combat the current wave of violent crime in Honduras. On March 5, they announced the joint police-military "Operation Hunter," consisting of an increase in police checkpoints in certain areas of the country. Honduran police and armed forces have carried out similar operations in the past, usually resulting in a lull in violence during the operation and a return to previous levels of violence once the operation has ended.
End Summary.

¶2. (U) In a hastily convoked press conference on March 4, police spokesmen said that President Manuel Zelaya was meeting with the police and armed forces and that the next day he would announce new measures to address the increase in violent crime in Honduras. High-level government officials and military leaders cancelled an important meeting with PolCouns and DATT at the last minute to attend the President's meeting. On March 5, the police and armed forces held another press conference to announce "Operation Hunter," which consists of an increase in police checkpoints, with army backup, in the most dangerous areas of the country: the cities of San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. This is not the first time the Honduran army and police have worked together at checkpoints throughout the country. The last large joint operation of this kind was "Operation Thunder," which took place during several months in 2006. Every Easter the police and military carry out routine joint operations at police checkpoints to prevent violence during the busiest tourism week of the year.

¶3. (SBU) Some particularly brutal crimes have been committed in Honduras during the first two months of 2008. The press has reported over 51 people murdered in groups of three to eight per incident so far this year. One of the mainstream newspapers stated that this number does not take into account the double murders that are occurring almost on a daily basis. The Commander of Operation Hunter, Police Director General Escoto Salinas, told PolOff that in the first two days of the operation, the incidence of crime has decreased significantly. He added that, contrary to press reports, the President has not decreed a state of emergency and that he probably will not. The press also reported possible curfews in the most dangerous neighborhoods. Escoto Salinas said that the police are analyzing the possibility but in his opinion, since the situation is already improving, the

curfews will probably not take place. He predicted that Operation Hunter will continue through Easter week, when firemen, NGOs, and other civil society groups traditionally work together with the police and the military to improve safety on the roads and at tourist destinations. Escoto Salinas said that Operation Hunter may be extended to additional areas of the country to reinforce the ongoing Operation Five Stars, which started approximately one month ago and also consists of an increase of police checkpoints, with the specific purpose of searching for illegal weapons. Operation Five Stars also began with military support.

14. (SBU) PolOff traveled for over seven hours from the northwest area of the country to the capital on March 5 and passed through several police checkpoints. There were approximately seven police officers performing the vehicle inspections and five members of the armed forces providing perimeter security at most of the points. Some did not have any military presence. The checkpoints were concentrated on the road from San Pedro Sula to Tegucigalpa. According to a military source, approximately 1,200 military personnel are involved in Operation Hunter. They are participating from various units in the regions surrounding Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula and include some special forces. The military do not have legal authority to carry out normal police duties such as arrests.

15. (C) Comment: Violent crime in Honduras has been on a steady increase over the years. For CY2007, RSO figures show that 10.5 murders a day took place in Honduras. Total murders for 2007 were 3,855, an increase of 800 from 2006. Measures like Operation Hunter are a common response by President Zelaya to show a population fed up with the violence that something is being done. Interestingly, the

Minister of Security was in the United States for an Organization of American States conference when Operation Hunter was announced. We think this was not done on purpose, but rather it is indicative of the President's lack of organization and his unpredictable decision-making style. In 2006, the Zelaya administration carried out the similar Operation Thunder, which lasted a couple of months. As past "lightning-bolt" operations have shown, the criminals lay low for a while and then resume their activities once the operation has ended. Honduras is lacking a long-term solution, which would require the authorities to develop a long-term plan. Law enforcement and justice institutions in Honduras are extremely weak and the authorities are at a loss on how to address crime. End Comment.

FORD